

**OPENING STATEMENT OF REP. SHEILA JACKSON LEE
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

**FIELD HEARING ON
“COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN OUR MAJOR CITIES”**

**HOUSTON, TEXAS
MARCH 20, 2014**

Thank you for holding today’s hearing on the issue of human trafficking in our major cities. Knowing of the magnitude of the problem in the State of Texas and the Houston area in particular, I requested this hearing shortly after my colleague from Texas became Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security.

I am very pleased that he agreed to my request and that we could come together on a bi-partisan basis today to convene the hearing. I also appreciate my other colleagues joining us and welcome them to my congressional district. We are fortunate to have an extremely knowledgeable and passionate group of law enforcement officials, experts, and advocates participating in the hearing as witnesses, and I look forward to a robust discussion today.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to Texas Southern University for hosting the hearing, which is being broadcast on the Committee on Homeland Security’s website and will become a part of the Committee’s record for the 113th Congress.

To understand why I believe so strongly that the Committee on Homeland Security should hold a hearing on human trafficking in Houston, you just have to read the tragic news stories involving human trafficking that happen all too frequently in our community. For example, a story from January of this year about a notorious Port of Houston-area cantina that functioned for years as a center for human trafficking and prostitution.

Or another story from earlier this year where a Houston-area trafficking ring had been bringing people into the country illegally from Mexico and Central America and sending them to work at restaurants for 12 hours a day, six days a week for very little money.

Or a story from last fall where Federal agents arrested suspects in connection with an alleged sex trafficking ring in Houston that prostituted underage, undocumented girls from Mexico who were locked up and beaten by their traffickers.

Tragically, these are not isolated incidents in our community. As a large city strategically located near the border, a major port, and critical transportation corridors, Houston is an attractive target for human trafficking organizations.

The statistics support this unfortunate fact. For example approximately 25 percent of human trafficking cases in the United States are located in Texas, and most of those occur in Houston, in recent years, approximately 30 percent of the calls received by the National Human Trafficking Hotline were out of Texas, the U.S. Department of Justice has identified the I-10 Corridor as the number one human trafficking route in the U.S., and one of every three runaways in Texas is lured into sex trafficking within 48 hours of leaving home.

Nationally, the Federal government estimates as many as 17,500 people are trafficked to this country each year, but reliable estimates are hard to come by due to the covert nature of the crime and underreporting by victims.

There are likely far more individuals being exploited by traffickers in places where they cannot be readily identified or counted. Exacerbating this problem is the fact that many trafficking victims come from the most vulnerable populations – children, women, and the undocumented.

Understanding the scope and seriousness of the human trafficking problem in Houston, across Texas, and throughout this country, the question remains: “How can we fix it?” Clearly, it will take cooperation from all stakeholders to address the complex issues involved.

Legislators, law enforcement officers, healthcare professionals, victims’ assistance organizations, and advocacy groups all have a vital role to play. We have brought together these stakeholders today to testify about their current efforts as well as what more needs to be done to address the scourge of human trafficking.

As a senior Member of the Committee on Homeland Security, I am particularly interested in hearing from our witness from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement about his agency’s efforts to combat human trafficking and what more Congress can do to support their work.

I look forward to a frank discussion today about how we can work together to assist victims of trafficking, prosecute the perpetrators, and someday rid our communities of human trafficking altogether. Because as Americans, we simply cannot allow human trafficking – a form of modern day slavery – to exist in our country.